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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the stress of inservice teachers and preservice student teachers. The situation of student teachers is compared to that of cultural anthropologists in the field. This paradigm aids student teachers to objectify and to cope with the stresses and strains of their own fieldwork. The student teaching practicum is viewed as a type of support group wherein fledglings seek help and profit from their peers. Trained by this model, beginning teachers are more apt to identify and reach out for similar on-the-job support. A cycle of reflective discussion and field activities engenders renewed courage, hope, and determination. (Author/JD)

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Abstract

Support for Student Teacher Stress

The paper compares the stress of inservice teachers and preservice student teachers. It relates the stress of student teachers to that of cultural anthropologists in the field. This paradigm aids student teachers to objectify and to cope with the stresses and strains of their own fieldwork. It is introduced and discussed in the student teaching practicum which is viewed as a type of support group wherein fledglings seek help and profit from their peers. Trained by this model, beginning teachers are more apt to identify and reach out for similar on-the-job support.

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SUPPORT FOR STUDENT TEACHER STRESS

Introduction

Stress is not confined to teachers in service. It afflicts preservice student teachers as well. Fortunately, student teachers have a built-in support group in the supervisor and students who share their weekly practicum sessions. These sessions provide a forum where they can examine the stresses inherent in fieldwork and develop strategies to cope with them. Unfortunately, opportunities afforded by the practicum often go unrecognized, or, they are underutilized.

Although stress is common to preservice and in-service teachers, each of these groups experiences stress differently. Teachers in service often experience stress from overloaded schedules, hassles with administrators, interpersonal conflicts, and inadequate resources due to budget cuts. The longer they suffer these conditions, the greater the pressure they feel. Unless there is a significant change within the school system or in their manner of coping, teacher stress increases with time.

Preservice teachers are "once removed" from the common causes of teacher stress. The transitory nature of their stay in a particular school frees them from the more debilitating pressures of the system. In contrast to their cooperating teachers, student teachers experience stress primarily from being plunged into a strange environment which other adults

control and, secondarily, from having to form a host of new, professional relationships.

One effective way to relieve student teacher stress is through the student teaching practicum. The latter has the potential to become a natural support group where student teachers can learn 1) to understand the stressful aspects of fieldwork, 2) to develop coping skills, and 3) to receive help and encouragement from peers and supervisor in working with personal stress.

Fieldworkers' Stress

The stress of student teachers may be compared to that of cultural anthropologists going to live among strangers in a foreign culture. At first, anthropologists were reluctant to discuss the feelings that characterized their initiation into the field. Gradually, they began to describe the difficult and stressful aspects of their fieldwork. Consideration of the psychological stress of cultural anthropologists enables student teachers to objectify their feelings and to gain valuable insight into stress-producing situations.

Writing about anthropologists, Ronald Wintrob (1969) identifies three categories of stress in fieldwork. They are: 1) maintaining the image of competence and knowledgeability, 2) the bias of personality whereby one tends to respond emotionally to the affective content of experience, and 3) the dysadaptation syndrome. The latter contains three elements, namely, the "conflict of involvement," the "conflict of commitment," and the "conflict of return".

Maintaining an image of competence and knowledgeability is of concern to anthropologists and student teachers alike. Following their assignment to a field site, student teachers enter what appears to them as the great unknown. Beset by feelings of insecurity, they strive valiantly to maintain an air of competence, and to give the impression that they know what they are doing. Gradually, they get their bearings and begin to assume the role of teacher. This process is facilitated when both student teachers and cooperating teachers clearly understand their respective roles.

Upon entering the field, anthropologists and student teachers share the need to develop a complex and extensive set of human relationships in a short span of time. Student teachers are often overwhelmed by the many persons -- administrators, teachers, and pupils -- who strive for their attention and seek to be known by them. Their cognitive abilities and their affectivities are subject to high levels of stress and strain. Ego strength is needed to keep the objective and subjective responses of their personality in a state of equilibrium.

As student teachers enter into the cultural scene of their field placement, they, too, experience the dysadaptation syndrome and, more particularly, the "conflict of involvement" noted by Wintrob. On the one hand, they are expected to act professionally and with a certain degree of independence. On the other hand, they are dependent on the cooperating teachers for their cues in decision-making. The type and degree of involvement often hinge on the way in which cooperating teachers introduce student teachers to their pupils. If the latter are perceived as co-teachers, one set of

expectations is established. If, however, student teachers are perceived primarily as "college students here to learn" the expectations are quite different. The co-teacher relationship helps to ameliorate the "conflict of involvement" and proves to be more satisfying and growth-producing.

Student teachers are also prone to the "conflict of commitment", a second feature of the dysadaptation syndrome. As the student teaching semester progresses, their identification with the pupils and their responsibility for pupil learning grow. They begin to refer to their pupils as "my class" or "our class". There is a sense in which they assume ownership, a state that leads cooperating teachers to feel that they are "losing their class". The threat is more easily resolved when cooperating teachers and student teachers see themselves as a team working together for the good of the pupils.

Finally, student teachers experience the "conflict of return" as they prepare to withdraw from their placements. They not only find leaving stressful, but also having to return to another cultural milieu and role at their college or university. This phenomenon frequently leads them to make rash promises to visit their cooperating teachers and pupils regularly when student teaching is completed. It can be a wrenching experience, accompanied by prolonged feelings of "homesickness".

It is helpful for student teachers to see themselves mirrored in the experiences of fieldworkers, such as the cultural anthropologists. The realization that they share common feelings enables them to identify with other professionals in training. Thus, student teachers can relate to the cultural anthropologists' rite of passage and better understand the

meaning of their own introduction to the field.

Practicum as Support Group

The natural group setting for the discussion of student teacher stress and the development of an informed perception on stress is the student teaching practicum. Here, the college supervisor and student teachers examine the similarities and differences between the pressures of student teaching and other types of fieldwork. Within this framework and in a climate of care and mutual concern, students speak about their feelings -- difficulties and delights. They frankly admit the costs and berefits of their adaptation to change. Unique though their experiences are, the student teachers realize that their hopes and fears are shared by other neophytes in the field.

The rating scale developed by Drs. Thomas H. Holmes and Richard Rahe (1967) of the University of Washington Medical School contributes to this reflective discussion. According to the scale, various events in life such as change to a different line of work, change in responsibilities at work, and change in work hours or conditions (p. 216) are assigned stress value points and the students are encouraged to measure their individual stress levels. The scale includes events which are common to everyday life and which show that personal factors and extra-school happenings add to the stress of student teaching. The variety of events contained on the scale underscore the holistic nature of human adaptation.

Secondly, the practicum provides a support group for coping with stress. The important message is that we cannot, nor are we expected to cope alone. In an age when self-help groups are growing by leaps and bounds, it is instructive for student teachers to learn that a group can assist in satisfying a common need, and salutary to learn how to use the group effectively.

Within the practicum group, student teachers find like-minded persons who are interested in their plight and able to hear them. They learn that it is not a sign of weakness to ask for help, but rather an indication of their desire to improve. Through directed discussion and role play, they modify their attitudes, generate strategies for productive handling of stress, and practice coping skills. Following the practicum, students return to their field placements where they apply what they have learned. At the next session, they report back to the group on their successes, failures, and discoveries. This cycle of reflective discussion and field activities engenders renewed courage, hope, and determination.

During the practicum sessions, student teachers also discuss the stresses experienced by their cooperating teachers. They study the manifestations of stress among teachers and the means of coping with it. They assess their own repertoire of behaviors that enable them to handle stress and they devise ways of developing additional skills for the future. The emphasis is on awareness, communicating, adjusting expectations, and reaching out; in general, on the process of coping and of giving help in the context of a support group.

The research base on stress and coping is indefinite. As Nora

Kinzer (1978) points out, "In essence, all the books, all the theories, all the research come up to a grandiose zero. The theories are in a state of confusion . . . The studies are contradictory" (p. 185). Until such time as we have conclusive data, honest sharing among the practicum participants provides some relief from the pressures of student teaching, and offers a viable plan for preparing to meet stress in the real world of the teacher.

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